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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 006229

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES HALKI WITH EDUCATION MINISTER

REF: ANKARA 895

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Eric S. Edelman; reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (U) Summary: During an October 26 meeting, the Ambassador recommended that Education Minister Celik engage in a dialogue with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on the re-opening of the Halki Seminary. The Ambassador told Celik that progress on Halki would bolster Turkey's image in the run-up to the December EU Summit, and strengthen the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, an institution that has been in Turkey for centuries. A flourishing Patriarchate would symbolize Turkey's commitment to religious freedom. Celik said he personally favors reaching an agreement to re-open the seminary, but elements of the State bureaucracy are opposed. Moreover, progress on Halki will remain politically difficult as long as the Greek Government refuses to loosen restrictions on the Turkish minority in Western Thrace. The Ambassador also informed Celik that the USG plans a significant increase in the Fulbright program for Turkey. End Summary.

Options for Re-Opening Halki

2. (U) The Ambassador recalled that in February (reftel) Celik said the Education Ministry was studying the possibility of allowing the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Halki Seminary to re-open as either: 1) a secondary school attached to the Education Ministry; 2) a faculty of a Turkish university; or 3) a two-year high school attached to a foundation. (Note: The Halki Seminary, on Heybeli Island in the Sea of Marmara, has been closed since 1971, when the GOT nationalized all private institutions of higher learning. End Note). Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has told us he has no objection in principle to having Halki placed under the aegis of the Education Ministry -- as it was before it was closed -- as long as it is permitted to carry out its mission of training clergy. This would mean, for example, that the Patriarchate would maintain control of the curriculum, and the seminary would be allowed to enroll foreign students. The Ambassador asked whether the Education Ministry been discussing the matter with the Patriarchate.

Legal, Political Obstacles

3. (C) Celik averred that he personally favors reaching an agreement on re-opening Halki, as do PM Erdogan and FM Gul. However, the issue is sensitive within the State bureaucracy and among the general public. There are legal issues relating to the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. Celik argued that it is difficult for the GOT to loosen restrictions on the Patriarchate while the Greek Government refuses to change its approach to the Turkish minority in Western Thrace. He claimed that ethnic Turks in Thrace cannot give Turkish names to their foundations and cannot elect their own muftus. "If this were not a two-sided issue, I would move to resolve it immediately," Celik said, adding that he has made his position clear in meetings with the Greek Education Minister. The fact that Patriarch Bartholomew claims to be an "ecumenical" leader -- though the GOT does not recognize his ecumenical status -- while the Turks in Thrace are denied religious freedom is very controversial among Turks. The Turkish side is always asked to compromise, while the Greeks are not asked to do anything. Still, Celik claimed he favors reaching an agreement on re-opening Halki even before resolving the problems of the Turks in Thrace. If such a decision is made at the State level, he averred, he could have the seminary re-opened in 24 hours. At the same time, he said, some voices within EU circles are making the problem more difficult by implying that resolving the Halki issue is a pre-condition for opening accession talks. Such comments provoke resistance within Turkey to reaching a settlement.

Ambassador Urges Dialogue

4. (C) The Ambassador noted that PM Erdogan raised the issue of the Muslim minority, diplomatically, when he visited

Greece. He also acknowledged the legal and political concerns surrounding the Halki issue. At the same time, progress on Halki in the run-up to the December EU Summit would positively influence the internal EU debate on Turkey. On Cyprus, Turkey took a bold step by supporting the Annan Plan without tying its decision to a reciprocal step by the other side. Although the Greek Cypriots rejected the plan, the GOT did not suffer a setback. Instead, the GOT succeeded in removing Cyprus as a potential obstacle to Turkey's EU candidacy. The GOT should consider taking a similarly bold step on Halki. The Ambassador recommended Celik speak with Patriarch Bartholomew, a man of good will and an advocate of Turkey's EU candidacy. The Patriarch is willing to be flexible, and could help with issues relating to the Thracian Turks. Although the Patriarch's ecumenical status may not be recognized in the Lausanne Treaty, millions of Orthodox Christians around the world regard him as their leader. The Patriarchate, which has been in Turkey since Byzantine times, is a great asset for Turkey. A flourishing Patriarchate would signal Turkey's commitment to religious freedom. On the other hand, if the Patriarchate were to languish, it could lose influence to other Orthodox institutions outside of Turkey, such as the Russian Orthodox Church.

15. (U) Celik agreed that the Patriarchate is important for Turkey. He said he has spoken with Patriarch Bartholomew in the past and would be happy to do so again -- when he has something new to tell him. However, there are no new developments on Halki since their last conversation. Celik said he will share the Ambassador's views with PM Erdogan and FM Gul.

Archons Returning

16. (U) The Ambassador thanked Celik for meeting in February with an eight-member delegation of the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, a New York-based Greek Orthodox group, to discuss Halki and other issues (reftel). He noted that the Archons plan to return to Ankara in December, and would like to meet with PM Erdogan if possible. He hoped Celik would also be available to meet with them.

Minister Aids Greek Schools

17. (U) On a separate but related point, Celik said Patriarch Bartholomew had raised with him transportation problems concerning Greek schools in Istanbul. Some transportation companies had refused to transport students to the schools. Celik said he canceled the contracts of the non-compliant companies and resolved the problem.

Pending Increase in Fulbright Program

18. (U) The Ambassador told Celik the USG is preparing to make a significant increase in the Fulbright program for Turkey, and will look for the GOT to increase its contribution as well. Celik said educational and cultural exchanges are essential for building trust and understanding between nations. He said the image of the U.S. in Turkey and the developing world has been deteriorating recently. He said the USG could be more effective in its efforts to bolster that image; for example, the British Council appears to be accomplishing more around the world than any U.S. agency. The Ambassador said the upcoming increase in the Fulbright program is an effort toward that goal.

Comment

19. (C) Though the GOT has been examining the Halki issue for some time, it has clearly decided it does not yet want to take on the political challenges required for a solution. Elements of the State bureaucracy oppose any loosening of restrictions on the Patriarchate, and public opinion is indifferent at best. Having failed to deliver on issues important to its more hardline, Islamist supporters -- such as the headscarf ban -- GOT leaders lack political cover to move on Halki. We will continue to urge our high-level contacts that religious freedom for non-Muslims is a crucial element of the reform process.

110. (C) We have consistently rejected any link between the rights of the Greek Orthodox in Turkey and the rights of the Turkish minority in Western Thrace. Turkey's Greek Orthodox are Turkish citizens, whose rights do not depend on the status of ethnic Turks living abroad. Nevertheless, we would be interested in Embassy Athens' views on the status of the Turkish community in Western Thrace.

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